

# To Assemble or Not?

By Patrick Swayne

You can't open up Facebook or turn on the evening news these days without seeing coronavirus-induced frustration. Depending on where you look though, you'll typically see two kinds of frustration from two camps of people. These camps oppose each other and voice their frustrations out of a desire for opposite things. Some people are frustrated that things are still closed due to the coronavirus and want them to open; others are frustrated that things are already opening up and think they should remain closed.

God's people are not immune to these frustrations, and, in my observation, can be found voicing their frustrations on either side of the issue. In fact, the tenor of the material Christians create while voicing their frustrations of one kind or another can sometimes be weightier and harsher than the material of their worldly counterparts. For many Christians, the easing or maintaining of quarantine restrictions is not just a matter of practical concern, it is matter of ethical concern. A lot of this concern surrounds in-person assembly; group one wants it back, yesterday if possible, while group two thinks that because alternatives to in-person assembly exist, it can and should wait.

Christians who want assembly to go back to normal cite a wide range of ethical concerns including 1) judging in-person meetings to be a test of faith in God, 2) judging their own faith and that of others to be too impacted by a lack of in-person meetings to be worth the price. Christians who want restrictions to stay in place also cite a wide range of ethical concerns including 1) judging such restrictions to be the product of valuing life and loving one's neighbor as himself; 2) judging those who would choose liberty at the potential price of someone's death as a selfish and un-Christlike.

There's a fair chance that you as a Christian have an opinion on this issue that has been shaped by ethical concerns. However, before you judge those on the other side of the issue, remember Paul's words: "Let us not judge one another anymore" (Romans 14:13). If this were a clear-cut ethical issue, then you could and should judge righteous judgment (John 7:24). But surely you can see that it's anything but clear-cut. Group one seeks to honor the first great commandment to love God supremely, while group two seeks to honor the second great commandment to love others more than self. Before you say that group one wins because it honors the first great command, remember what Jesus said, "the second is like it" (Matthew 22:39; Mark 12:31).

As you remember Paul's words, remember two other inspired statements. First, "Do not speak evil of one another, brethren" (James 4:11). Satan wins when Christians speak against each other, especially when they do so over social media and/or behind the backs of their local leadership. Second, "Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account" (Hebrews 13:17). It is the duty of the leadership of a local church to look out for the souls of her members, and it is the duty of members to make their job as easy as possible. This is not an easy decision for leaders, so pledge to support them as much as you can. Remember: in matters of faith, unity; in matters of opinion, liberty; in all things, charity.